

can bowls overflowing with exquisitely wrapped chocolates, three enormous reclining Buddhas, a stuffed cockatoo perched beneath a boundlessly funereal arrangement of white lilies, another strange item of taxidermy in a cut-crystal cage, and a divan so overstuffed with pillows as to suggest that Lévy may be some sort of sultan of the Left Bank.

Lévy has still not arrived, and Harry is too discreet for extended conversation, so I find myself peeking at the books. A good few of them have been thrown, with studious abandon, about the room. Can they tell us anything about the mind of the philosopher? I'm not sure. I spot something odd about the gargantuan volume of Pascal on the floor. The pages look wrong, as if they've been painted over. And sure enough, on closer inspection it turns out not to be a book, but a fake – a *trompe l'oeil* drawer carved out where the words used to be.

At that very moment, Lévy sashays into the room. He is wearing the foundation required by his televisual activities, and this clearly bothers him enough to affect his manners. As I go to shake his hand he says: 'I don't usually wear make-up, you know.'

Lévy's reputation for narcissism is unparalleled in his home country, and he's not unaware of the fact. The headline of one article about him coined the immortal dictum, 'God is dead but my hair is perfect'. He has been known to say that the discovery of a new shade of grey leaves him 'ecstatic', and that people who vote for Jean-Marie Le Pen cannot buy Philippe Starck furniture or Yohji Yamamoto clothes (as if their aesthetic taste were their greatest offence). Maybe it's the make-up, but Lévy seems a little tense. He's keen to get me out of the sultan's salon and into his far more austere study, where a modern sculpture of a deliberately empty-headed Lenin provides an unwitting reminder of Lévy's own relationship to Pascal. He sits down, furrows his brow, makes a few bossy demands about how the interview is to be conducted, and proceeds noisily to inhale substantial amounts of phlegm at regular intervals.

LEVY IS in the news because his twenty-ninth book, an investigation into the murder of the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, has been at the top of the bestseller list in France since it came out just over a month ago. Lévy's discovery, or contention, is that Pearl's death was a 'state crime' committed in effect by the Pakistani government, because Pearl knew too much about the links between its secret service, nuclear scientists and al-Qaeda. The book led Lévy on a year-long quest he admits became something of an obsession. 'That part of the world,' Lévy explains, 'is where I have been, since my adolescence, most irresistibly drawn. Not the Middle East, despite the fact that I am Jew-



ish, not China and the Far East, despite the fact that I was once very close to what in the Sixties was called Maoism, not Africa, though I know it well. So in writing about Pearl I often had the sense that I was retracing my own steps.'

It's not unusual for Lévy to insert himself into his writing, but this book takes a new form he terms 'romanquête', or 'investigative novel', indicating that where the facts run out, he has gone ahead and made some up. He allows himself some dramatic musings, for example, on what might have passed through Pearl's mind in the last moments of his life: 'He thinks of Mariane, that last night, so desirable, so beautiful – what do women want, deep down? Passion? Eternity?'

Whether or not these imaginings are to everyone's taste, there is a more unsettling doubt raised by the fusion of genres. Some of Lévy's critics have long considered even his most solidly non-fictional books to contain elements of untruth. Twenty years ago he was taken to task by Pierre Vidal-Nacquet for gross factual errors, the most patent of which was having Himmler stand trial at Nuremberg, when he had already committed suicide. Others have simply assumed that Lévy's books are veiled forms of autobiography anyway.

This view couldn't be further from Lévy's own since, as he explains, 'I'm not trying to be devious or coy here, but I am curious about everything – except myself. All of my books are turned to face others, not inwards towards myself. Half of my contemporaries have already published autobiographies – Martin Amis has, and he's younger than me. But I have no desire to do that.'

Lévy is something of a conundrum. On the one hand, he is such a po-faced laughing stock that the famed anarchist pie-thrower Noël Godin has hit him a record five times. On the other, huge numbers of peo-

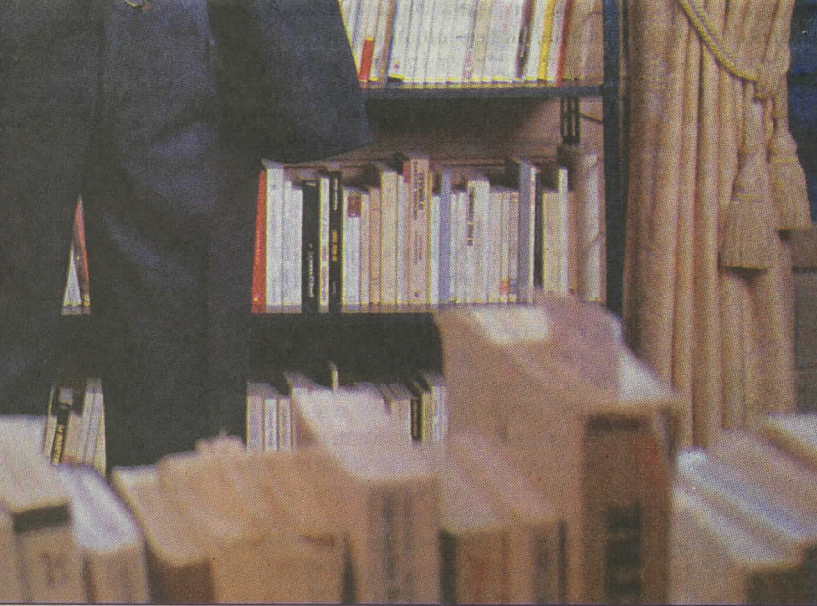
ple buy his books. I serious thinker the I is charismatic and constantly in demand. I only to laugh at him much of whathe's d to a kind of conser people's attention to camps in Bosnia, tri rebel leader Ahmed before his death, was government on a fa last year to seehow reconstructed, and r per there that pr Islam'. He founded to empower Arab a France, and warne recent rise of Jean I taken very seriously

Still, it's perhaps him quite as serious self. I ask him what i lic intellectual whe public about him is wedding to Arielle ago was attended by Saint Laurent, Fra tycoon who owns G and, by Lévy's own c national photograph 'That,' he says, with my being an i



Lévy with his wife Arielle Dombasle.

'BHL is a character constructed partly by myself and partly by others. It's a puppet that can sometimes turn against you'



is not the most French have, but he accessible and con- would be churlish, since to dismiss ne would amount atism. Lévy drew erb concentration d to rescue Afghan ahah Massoud just sent by the French t-finding mission ganistan might be ow runs a newspa- motes 'moderate a anti-racist group d black people in of the dangerous arie Le Pen. He is very high places. ot essential to take y as he takes him- means to be a pub- much of what is is private life. His ombasle 10 years Alain Delon, Yves çois Pinault (the cci and Christie's) unt, 20 or 30 inter- ers. ad nothing to do lectual. If *Paris*

Match was interested in my wedding it was because I married an actress.' But they were interested in you before your wedding, I suggest. He smiles to himself a little: 'Yes,' he says, 'it's true.'

Lévy claims to have no explanation for this, and is exasperated by the way in which his designer suits and unbuttoned white shirts have been fetishised by the press. 'If I wore green-and-red checked shirts, I'd understand,' he says, 'but white shirts? There's nothing more banal, more idiotic than a white shirt!'

But, I ask, would he say he was interested in fashion? He sighs. 'I was interested once, 15 years ago, in one designer, about whom I wrote one or two pages, and whose name was Yves Saint Laurent. But what interested me about him was the semiology of his draughtsmanship.'

'So he didn't give you any clothes?'

'No. Never.' Lévy opens the jacket of his blue suit to show me the label - Charvet, a deliberately unrecognisable brand. 'You see?' he says. 'It's absurd.'

Lévy says he just gets on with his work 'without wondering whether the fact that I am a star might get in the way'. He insists that he does nothing to encourage his fans. 'People,' he says, 'don't know that much about my life.'

BERNARD-HENRI LEVY was born in Algeria in 1948. His mother was the daughter of a rabbi, and his father had fought in the Spanish Civil War. During the Second World War, Lévy *père* joined the Free French, and afterwards founded a lumber company that made him a millionaire. Bernard-Henri has a sister, Véronique, and a brother, Philippe, who was run over by a car in 1968 and about whom he will not speak except to confirm that he is still in a coma.

He studied at the *École Normale Supérieure* under the tutelage of the great Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who was later committed to an insane asylum after murdering his wife. The news about the murder came to Lévy as a terrible shock, but he still considers the man his mentor: 'After-

Portrait by Alexis Duclos/Katz

has recently found success with an album on which she sings techno versions of Fauré and Handel. In public, she still addresses Lévy, formally, as 'vous'.

Five years ago, Lévy directed his wife in his first feature film. She starred opposite Alain Delon, who played a writer clearly based on Lévy himself. The film was universally panned, not least for the final scene in which the writer dies in a ballooning accident, exploding, as it were, in his own hot air. Lévy is still proud of the film, which he says is 'a lot like me'.

Since he thinks no one knows anything about his life, would Lévy say that BHL is a character, a construction?

'Yes,' he admits, 'but a character constructed partly by myself and partly by others. It's a puppet, and there are times when it can turn against you.'

'But is there any of you in it - are you pulling the puppet's strings?'

'Yes, of course. He's not a stranger to me. But I can hide behind him, and through him I can fight - against Islamists, fascists, bad guys. BHL is a good soldier. BHL is a good mask... When one attacks BHL one does not attack Bernard-Henri Lévy. And BHL is a caricature. He is all of those things.'

'So,' I conclude, after this barrage of third person proclamations, 'you don't feel personally attacked when people criticise you?'

'No,' Lévy says, 'Often, I feel - with good reason - that they are aiming at someone else.'

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